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WHITE HOUSE FOR OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT, DEPARTMENT
FOR NEA/ARP, G/TIP

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SUBJECT: OMAN INDIGNANT OVER 2008 TIP REPORT; SUSPENDS TIP
COOPERATION AND THREATENS REAPPRAISAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONSHIP

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (U) This is an Action Request. Please see paragraph 8 below.

12. (C) Summary: Sayyid Badr al-Busaidy, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), told me June 9 that the government of Oman does not accept Oman's placement on Tier 3 of the 2008 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report and demanded an official retraction. Until this retraction, Oman is suspending all cooperation with the U.S. on trafficking. He further warned that in the absence of such a retraction, the government would be forced to reassess all aspects of its relationship with the U.S. End summary.

13. (C) In a June 9 meeting, a visibly agitated Sayyid Badr al-Busaidi described Oman's placement on Tier 3 in the 2008 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report as a "knife in the back" to one of America's closest friends and allies in the region. He described our report as a "personal insult to the Sultan and an affront to the government and the people of Oman." (Note: The written Omani response is provided in full at the end of this message. End Note.) He forcefully stated that the government "will not stand for it" and told me that Oman, henceforth, is suspending all cooperation with the U.S. on the issue of TIP. Sayyid Badr also warned that without a retraction of Oman's tier ranking, Oman is prepared to reevaluate "all aspects of our bilateral relationship," including the U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

14. (C) Sayyid Badr advised that he is scheduled to brief the Council of Ministers tomorrow on the TIP report, and that he saw a "very real possibility" that the Council will stop all action on the anti-TIP draft law that it has been reviewing since January 2008 until the U.S. changes Oman's Tier 3 ranking. He stated that the government feels that the U.S. has impugned the character of the country through the TIP report and that it will not accept our recommended action steps or "operate on (our) clock." Sayyid Badr asserted that providing Oman with a 60-day time period in which to take additional action was "the wrong way to approach the issue," and said that Oman would take no action to address TIP until the U.S. started "treating Oman as a friend."

15. (C) Sayyid Badr criticized the report as "baseless" and deemed its findings a "gross misunderstanding of Oman's approach to human rights and law enforcement." He complained that the tier ranking places Oman in league with countries that have enormous TIP problems and in which Oman "does not belong." He incredulously asked how the U.S. could even implicitly compare the extent of Oman's trafficking problem with that of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - upgraded to Tier 2 in this year's report - where "thousands of prostitutes roam the streets of Dubai." While the government received the 2007 report "in stride," Oman cannot accept this year's report, Sayyid Badr continued, and demands a change in the tier ranking.

16. (C) I responded to Sayyid Badr that the U.S. would not be

able to change the findings of a public report without some action on Oman's part, pointing out that the Tier 3 ranking reflects the fact that Oman had not fulfilled core U.S. recommendations to combat TIP over the past year. I further explained that we have been very clear with the Omani government about actions we deemed necessary to address TIP in Oman. Between 2006 and 2007, we saw little movement and only modest gains since last year's report. Suspension of consideration on Oman's draft law would be exactly the wrong action and would likely make Oman's removal from Tier 3 all but impossible. Instead, I encouraged Sayyid Badr to recommend to the Council of Ministers that it quickly pass the draft anti-TIP law, and urge relevant government entities to increase prosecutions under existing laws and start providing services to potential TIP victims if it wanted the U.S. to reassess Oman's ranking. While denying a significant trafficking problem in Oman, Sayyid Badr pledged to "personally attend" to any TIP case brought to his attention. He added, however, that neither he nor any other member of the government would take any action on the U.S. action plan until we withdraw the Tier 3 ranking. He said that Oman is addressing TIP in its own way, and that the report now has made it impossible for us "to conduct business (on any issue) as we have in the past."

17. (C) Comment: Sayyid Badr's strong response likely came with the approval of the Sultan. In my experience, it is unprecedented for a senior Omani official to question our long-standing relationship, which the Omanis frequently describe as "strategic," and even to suggest that the FTA - a personal initiative of the Sultan - may be in jeopardy. "We have never spoken to you like this before," Sayyid Badr reminded me, and as an indication of how serious the government viewed this matter, he said that he would not meet with a U.S. delegation coming to Oman on Tuesday to discuss civil nuclear cooperation.

18. (C) Comment (continued) and Action Request: Sayyid Badr asked me for a letter from a high ranking U.S. official - no lower than the Secretary - that promises to take Oman off Tier 3, describes how the U.S. and Oman will work together on TIP and other sensitive issues in the future, and reassures Oman about the importance of our bilateral relationship. Post requests Department interim guidance in responding to Sayyid Badr's request and the Omani memorandum provided below. End Comment.

19. (C) Text of Memorandum from Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

From the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman To The State Department of the United States: Memorandum concerning 2008 Trafficking in Persons Country Narrative Oman

The Sultanate of Oman has received the 2008 Trafficking in Persons Narrative concerning Oman assigning Tier 3 with very grave concern. The findings of this report from the United States' State Department are unfounded, insulting, and entirely misleading. We therefore strongly object to it and wish to state our complete rejection of it.

In our response to the 2007 Trafficking in Persons Country Narrative we offered detailed and thorough explanations of our position, not only in our firm stand against all forms of human trafficking, but also of the social and cultural nature of Omani society and the practical circumstances in our country that make the form of appraisal applied by these reports irrelevant and inappropriate. The reality is that the various very serious issues which are the concern of these reports are thankfully only rarely a problem in Oman. Furthermore, on the rare occasions when such problems do arise, they are dealt with quickly and thoroughly by the concerned authorities in accordance with the law. The modus used by our authorities is, of course, in keeping with our own cultural norms and not those that are alien to us. This includes, for example, such matters as concern for privacy, and avoiding the unfair application of stigma.

As such the Sultanate of Oman finds the 2008 report not only continues to apply indiscriminately the same inappropriate and irrelevant yardsticks, but also does so with yet more insulting, thoughtless, and judgmental language. Furthermore our concern is greatly exacerbated by the fact that these reports are indisputably official documents of the United States.

Both the 2007 and the 2008 reports contradict the long standing, strategic and friendly relationship between our two countries and are totally out of step with the clearly stated and consistent views of the President of the United States, the Vice President of the United States, and the Secretary of State of the United States, as expressed time and again on numerous occasions and in their meetings with Omani government high ranking officials.

With this in mind, the Sultanate of Oman would be grateful to receive an official explanation and retraction from the United States. In the absence of this the Sultanate of Oman will be unable to offer further cooperation and dialogue with the United States on this topic, and, with great regret, will be left with no alternative but to conduct a fundamental reappraisal of our relations with the United States.

End Text of Memorandum.

GRAPPO